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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS DISSIDENT BUDDHIST LEADER
THICH THIEN HANH IN HUE

REF: A) HCMC XXXX B) HCMC 623

1. (SBU) Summary: At an August 13 meeting with Thich Thien Hanh, the senior-most member of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in Hue, the Ambassador encouraged Hanh and the UBCV to seek to regularize their legal status. Hanh said the UBCV could envision working with the GVN, but only if it were granted real independence. He did not indicate that the UBCV is willing to dilute the pro-democracy elements of its agenda. According to Hanh, he and the Hue chapter of the UBCV remain under tight control. While he recently was allowed to travel to attend the funeral of a UBCV colleague in Nha Trang, his delegation was prevented from making an impromptu stop to visit UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh Province. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On August 13, the Ambassador met with Thich Thien Hanh, senior-most member of the unregistered Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), at his Bao Quoc Pagoda in Hue. Hanh said he and ten other UBCV monks have been under unofficial pagoda arrest since October 2003, when he participated in an organizational meeting of the UBCV in Binh Dinh Province.

3. (SBU) According to Hanh, officials continue to prevent him from visiting UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh Province. His latest failed attempt came on June 21, when he led a group of nine monks from Hue to Nha Trang to attend the funeral of a fellow UBCV monk. He had obtained permission for that travel from Hue officials. However, on the return trip, the group made an unannounced stop in Binh Dinh Province. They arrived in Binh Dinh around 1:30 p.m. and then traveled by motorcycle to the Patriarch's pagoda. En route, they were stopped by two plainclothes police officers, who said it was not "safe" for them to continue. When the police refused to produce identification, the monks continued on foot.

4. (SBU) After they had gone about 30 meters, a police van approached from the other direction. The police in the van asked the monks to go back to their car and return to Hue, but Hanh replied that they would proceed unless the police could show they were authorized to stop the monks. According to Hanh, when the police began threatening to arrest the driver of their van, they ended their attempt to visit Thich Huyen Quang and returned to their vehicle. Once on the National Highway, the UBCV van was escorted by two police cars. After 12 kilometers, the police stopped them to return the driver's papers. At that time, a verbal confrontation with the police ensued. One monk fainted. The police asked the monks to follow them to the office of the District's People Committee, where they stayed overnight, apparently unattended. The following morning, the group was allowed to return to Hue.

5. (SBU) Hanh said he plans to try again to visit Thich Huyen Quang in the near future, this time informing officials in advance. However, he is skeptical that the result would be any different. Hanh said that of the 25 monks living at the Bao Quoc Pagoda, he is the only one allowed to travel. The Ambassador indicated that he is prepared to intercede with the GVN in support of a visit to Thich Huyen Quang. (Note: According to our UBCV contacts, after his meeting with the Ambassador, Thich Thien Hanh requested permission for a 24-monk delegation from Hue to visit Thich Huyen Quang on August 22, but was denied. The state-owned car company in the province terminated the car rental contract at the last minute and no private car owner agreed to transport them to Binh Dinh.)

Status of the UBCV

6. (SBU) Turning to the status of the UBCV, the Ambassador emphasized that the USG supports the UBCV and has encouraged the GVN to recognize it as an independent organization. Hanh replied that he is

aware of and appreciates USG support. He added that the UBCV would continue to fight for democracy for all Vietnamese, particularly for the 80 percent who "follow some religion." The Ambassador advised Hanh that the UBCV needs to begin a dialogue with the GVN to restore its legal status, since the UBCV could not be an active and effective organization in Vietnam while operating outside the law. Noting that political change in Vietnam will be a slow process, he recommended that the UBCV accept the leadership roles of the Communist Party and the Vietnamese Government. Hanh replied that were the Party to demonstrate good leadership, the UBCV would be willing to cooperate. However, he expressed doubt about the Party, recounting how it had repressed the UBCV since 1981, when it had created and recognized the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. He added that if the United States does not support bringing democracy and more freedom to Vietnam, Vietnamese people would "lose their affection for America."

17. (SBU) Comment: At least Thich Thien Hanh did not completely rule out discussions with the GVN on regularizing the status of the UBCV. However, at present, neither side appears prepared to compromise. In a separate conversation, the Chairman of the Thua Thien Hue People's Committee told the Ambassador that the religious freedom situation in the province is "perfect," even as the province keeps the UBCV under tight control. For his part, Hanh must have known that his impromptu attempt to visit Thich Huyen Quang would fail and would provoke a response. And by trying, he embarrassed those officials in Hue who had sanctioned his travel (to another UBCV event) in the first place. Hanh also does not appear ready to yield or to ease up on the political elements of his organization's agenda, the sine qua non of any compromise with the GVN. End Comment.

WINNICK